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RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 0422
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0130
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0289
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/OSD WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUCPDO/USDOC WASHDC 0563
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
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RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 0525
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BISHKEK 000350

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DEPT FOR SCA/CEN (GEHRENBECK)

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SUBJECT: PROFILE OF NEW KYRGYZ PRIME MINISTER ALMAZ
ATAMBAYEV

REF: BISHKEK 343

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Classified By: Ambassador Marie Yovanovitch for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: A northern native with a background in business, new Kyrgyz Prime Minister Almaz Atambayev is a former parliamentarian who has previously harbored presidential ambitions. His People's Congress of Kyrgyzstan was an active player in the March 2005 revolution. Atambayev worked as Minister of Industry, Trade and Tourism for less than a year, before he resigned citing disagreements with President Bakiyev's policies and agenda. A former leader of the Za Reformi (For Reforms) movement, he began to moderate his opposition to the government following Prime Minister Kulov's ouster. His calls for dialogue with the government in mid-March culminated in his election to the prime ministerial post March 30. End summary.

Background Facts

¶2. (SBU) The new 51 year-old Kyrgyz Prime Minister Almaz Atambayev hails from the same northern village as his predecessor, Azim Isabekov. After completing his education at the Academy of Management in Moscow in 1980, Atambayev held several administrative positions in Bishkek. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, he formed the Forum Industrial Group, a company he heads to the present day. The company manufactures car parts and batteries. Its 3,000 employees offer Atambayev a ready pool of supporters he can turn out on the streets.

Political Beginnings

¶3. (SBU) In 1993, Atambayev founded and became the leader of the Social Democratic Party. From 1995-2000, he sat in the upper chamber of the Kyrgyz parliament, the People's Representative Assembly. However, he lost a 2000 parliamentary election following a legal challenge by his opponent. He finished third, garnering six percent of the vote, in presidential elections later that year. In the years preceding the March 2005 revolution, Atambayev was an active opponent of President Askar Akayev. He was a founding member of the People's Congress of Kyrgyzstan) a bloc of opposition parties formed in 2002. Fearing for his life, Atambayev fled Kyrgyzstan for Turkey in 2002. Since his return several months later, he has maintained an armed escort of at least three bodyguards. In December 2004, Atambayev's People's Congress of Kyrgyzstan joined the Forum of Political Forces, an agglomeration of several groups including Bakiyev's People's Movement of Kyrgyzstan, Roza Otunbayeva's Atajurt movement, Muratbek Imanaliyev's New Course movement and Misir Ashirkulov's Civic Alliance for Honest Elections. These groups were key players in the March 2005 revolution.

Joining the Government

¶4. (SBU) Atambayev was critical in the 2005 formation of the tandem between Bakiyev and Felix Kulov, even though it meant abandoning his planned run for the presidency. Later, in September 2005, he became Minister of Industry, Trade and Tourism. He resigned in April 2006 after refusing to comply with a presidential order requiring government officials to

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suspend or denounce their membership in political parties. Ever outspoken, Atambayev also protested the direction of President Bakiyev's policies, and Bakiyev's inability to implement reforms and fight crime and corruption.

In the Opposition Again

¶5. (SBU) In April 2006, Atambayev became co-leader of the Za Reformi (For Reforms) FR) opposition movement (and led the group jointly with former Prime Minister Tekebayev until March 27, 2007.) During the April, May and November 2006 mass rallies, Atambayev demanded the resignation of both Bakiyev and Kulov. Many of the rallies' participants were members/supporters of Atambayev's Social Democratic Party and/or his employees. In November 2006, Atambayev expected Kulov to join the opposition demonstrators and was bitterly disappointed when Kulov instead supported President Bakiyev. Following Kulov's resignation and the formation of the Kulov-led United Front (UF), Atambayev's views moderated. He publicly disagreed with the UF's call for Bakiyev's resignation, and remained highly critical of Kulov. (Note: After Kulov joined the opposition, he became a competitor for leadership of the opposition. End note.)

¶6. (SBU) In February, after Kulov formed the United Front, Atambayev told the Charge of his deep distrust of Kulov, who he believed was motivated solely by ambition for power. He, Atambayev, wanted constitutional and other reforms, and was prepared to work with Bakiyev if he would support reforms. He did not rule out aligning with Kulov if Bakiyev proved intractable, but this was not his preferred option. He said he had contacts "on both sides" and could play a mediating role. Starting in mid-March, Atambayev began calling publicly for dialogue with the government. In a recent meeting with the Ambassador (reftel) he outlined three conditions for joining a Bakiyev cabinet as PM. He subsequently met Bakiyev March 21, and the President has since met all three conditions. Atambayev was named Acting PM on March 29, following former PM Isabekov's resignation.

Comment

17. (C) Atambayev has enjoyed excellent relations with the Embassy over a number of years. If President Bakiyev allows him to do his job, he will be a huge improvement over his predecessor. However, beyond the considerable substantive challenges of the job (septel), observers of the political scene are already wondering how long the volatile Atambayev will be able to work with President Bakiyev before he quits in a huff. In addition, Atambayev has told us he has ulcers, and he is often in the hospital for extended periods. Today, Kyrgyz Ambassador to the United States Zamira Sydykova told us that Atambayev had suffered two heart attacks, making it difficult for him to work a full day.

YOVANOVITCH